TL963

EAST TIMOR: FROM 'SLAVERY & OPPRESSION & TYRANNY' TO FREEDOM

presented by Abé Barreto Soares
National Council of Maubere Resistance
tour of North America, April 1993

In December 1975, when East Timor was invaded by the Indonesian military, I was just nine years old. I fled to the countryside with my family. After 1975, I began a new life under Indonesian occupation in my father's home town. When I returned to primary school all my classes were conducted in Indonesian. Our Portuguese schools had all been closed down.

After the invasion, the Indonesian troops kept telling us 'we are your brothers and sisters. We come to liberate you, to free you from colonization'. They said Indonesia was a great nation; that integration with Indonesia was the best solution for East Timor. But how could we believe this? Even I as a small boy, I asked myself 'if the Indonesian military say we are all brothers and sisters, why do they kill us in the jungle?' Why do innocent people just disappear when they surrender to the military? Why did the Indonesian military bomb my people in the forests, why was my mother's sister, her husband, her children, the whole family, wiped out when the Indonesians dropped bombs on their camp site? My mother's youngest sister died of disease in the jungle: there was neither food nor medicine to keep her alive. Her young brother 'disappeared.' Why did these things happen, I asked myself.

Even in my father's village people I knew 'disappeared'. Often people's stock, their very livelihood, was stolen by the military. One day, the soldiers killed one of my relative's buffalos. He protested and because he protested, he was accused of being a member of Fretilin (Frente Revolucianaria de Timor Leste Independente), one of the East Timorese political parties. The soldiers threatened him and scared him so much that he decided to remain silent regardless of what happened to him in the future. Even today, anyone suspected of being a member of Fretilin is arrested and imprisoned. All indigenous political activity is banned in East Timor. We are not even allowed to listen to foreign broadcasts like Radio Australia or VOA, the Voice of America. If people are caught listening, they are punished. We are never allowed forget we are in an occupied country.

I still remember the horrors of my childhood, but one incident stands out in my memory more vividly than others. One afternoon I was playing football with my friends in the street and an army truck drove past full of *hansip*, the armed militia. The men were shouting and singing – and holding high the severed heads of several guerrilla fighters. It was a warning to us not to support the resistance. I felt very frightened.

In 1981 I went to high school in Dili, the capital of East Timor and heard many more stories of atrocities committed by the Indonesian army. But in 1983, there was a ceasefire between the East Timorese resistance and the Indonesian military. My friends and I were very excited about this. We talked about it incessantly. Unfortunately the ceasefire didn't last long and I began to despair again for my country.

I did well at high school, and wanted to continue my studies at university. There was no university in East Timor so I had to go to Java. But before I left, I had to pass a test to determine whether or not I was a member of Fretilin. I passed that examination in 1985 and began my academic career at Java's Gadjah Mada University.

In 1989 I returned to East Timor for the visit of Pope John Paul II. I felt a real sense of hope in the air, an expectation that the Pope could heal the suffering of the East Timorese people. I attended the Mass he celebrated in Tacitolo on the outskirts of Dili and watched as brave young people unfurled pro-independence banners and shouted pro-independence slogans. Again I watched as these demonstrators were beaten by Indonesian security forces. Later I heard they were jailed and interrogated.

While I was at university I kept asking myself 'for who's sake am I studying? Is it for a free East Timor, or is it for the sake of the invader?' I was suffering a profound inner conflict and had to do something to resolve it. So in 1990 I began associating with members of Renetil, the East Timorese students resistance organization. Eventually I became a active member myself.

I returned to East Timor in 1991 to assist one of my professors with some language research. At that time, Indonesia was telling the world that everything was fine in East Timor. And this is what I had read in the Indonesian press. But while I was in Dili, the Indonesian secret police were following me around everywhere. I felt very uneasy. I kept asking myself 'if everything is fine here, why all this surveillance?'

I must have convinced the authorities that I was a model student nevertheless, because when I went back to Gadjah Mada, I was offered a place in a three month cultural exchange program to Canada. I left for Canada in September 1991. In November, just as the program was finishing, a friend rang to tell me about the massacre in Dili. At the Santa Cruz cemetery. Later, like many of you, I watched it on the television news. Young people, many younger than me, bleeding, dying. Shot for conducting a peaceful demonstration, for daring to resist .

Soon after the massacre in Dili, I heard that my Renetil colleagues had been arrested for conducting a peaceful demonstration in the Indonesian capital Jakarta. They had been protesting about the massacre and about human rights abuses since the invasion in 1975.

These two events – the Santa Cruz massacre and the arrest of my Renetil friends in Jakarta – changed my life. I now had to accept that I too could be arrested – or worse – if I returned to Indonesia. I searched my soul and decided to seek political asylum in Canada. It was the hardest decision I have ever made.

Although exile is very painful and I often long to be back with my family and friends, I realize I am in an extraordinarily privileged position for unlike my colleagues in Indonesia and in East Timor, I can now work for the future of my country without the fear of being arrested or imprisoned, without the fear of 'disappearing.' I do have to accept however,

that my speaking out here is threatening my family and friends back home. I sometimes break out in a cold sweat just thinking about it. And sometimes I get very worried that Indonesian intelligence is monitoring my activities here in North America. But what can I do? There are times when we human beings just have to follow our consciences and accept the consequences. No pain, no gain I keep telling myself.

And it is urgent for the East Timorese that we have people outside who are prepared to speak on behalf of all those who cannot speak out for themselves back in East Timor. The message of the Santa Cruz cemetery is that anyone who dares to resist the Indonesian occupation of our country, anyone who dares to protest, anyone who dares to cry out to the rest of the world from inside East Timor, will be killed. It is a monumental price for young people to have to pay for what they believe in; a monumental price for any nation to have to pay for its right of self-determination.

Indonesia claims we have already exercised our right of self-determination though. Indonesia says the East Timorese invited the Indonesians into East Timor then voted to become the 27th province of the Republic of Indonesia. But this is not the truth.

After the brief civil war in East Timor, a few leaders of the defeated opposition parties, did seek integration with Indonesia. But the people of East Timor did not. After the invasion, the Indonesians instituted a 'Provisional Government' in East Timor, and then a 'Regional Popular Assembly'. The first resolution adopted by this so-called 'Popular Assembly' at its very first meeting in May 1976, was to request integration with Indonesia. In June that year, a small and non-representative delegation of people from Dili went to Jakarta to present a petition to President Suharto which also requested integration.

On the basis of the Popular Assembly resolution and the petition, plus so-called evidence from a 'fact finding' mission to East Timor, the Indonesian parliament approved a bill to formally annex my country in 1976. From a Timorese point of view, the whole exercise was a carefully orchestrated sham to validate Indonesia's military invasion.

Fortunately the international community has refused to recognize the annexation. The United Nations General Assembly acknowledged that the people of East Timor had not freely exercised their right of self-determination, and between 1976 and 1982, adopted resolutions every year condemning the invasion. Australia is one of the few countries that has given *de jure* recognition to the annexation – to the shame of many Australian citizens. To the rest of the world, Portugal is still East Timor's legitimate administering power, and East Timor remains a non self-governing territory.

I should like to mention also, that most of the East Timorese people who allegedly supported integration with the Republic of Indonesia have since left East Timor. They now claim they were intimidated into supporting Indonesia's interests. It is worth remembering too, that in 1976 when these events took place, most of the urban population was hiding in the mountains which were controlled by East Timorese resistance fighters or had escaped to Australia or Portugal.

As I have already mentioned, I was just a child at the time, and had fled with my family to a rural village. But even I could see that my people were living in daily fear, that they were being slaughtered and imprisoned and intimidated into submission. It is inconceivable that we the East Timorese people would have chosen to align ourselves with our murderers at

that time. The resolution passed under threat in the brief first sitting of the so-called Regional Popular Assembly in 1976, was no act of self-determination: Indonesia's claims that it was have no credibility either in East Timor or in the international community.

The massacre at Santa Cruz cemetery on November 12, 1991 which so changed my life, proved to the world that the human rights abuses of the past seventeen years in East Timor continue. It also proved to the outside world, that young East Timorese are still willing to risk their lives for the freedom of their country; that all the resources the Indonesian government claims to have spent in East Timor have failed to buy the hearts and minds of the East Timorese people.

Until the issue of self-determination is addressed in East Timor, young people will continue to oppose the occupation of our country: and while we resist, we will continue to be the victims of a wide range of human rights abuses. For in East Timor, human rights abuses cannot be separated from the East Timorese struggle for self-determination. There will be more human rights abuses in East Timor as long as the Indonesian military remains there, as long as we are denied our right of self-determination.

Let me finish with the words of a Lebanese poet I respect highly, Kahlil Gibran.

I love freedom and my love for
true freedom grew with my growing
knowledge of the people's surrender
to slavery and oppression and tyranny.

Like this poet, I too am touched by my people's need. I cannot sit on the fence and watch them suffer. I have to do what I can. But, because of the complexities of international relations, we East Timorese cannot win our freedom alone. We need your solidarity, your practical support to resolve the conflict in my country. To create the political will for the nations of the world to force a withdrawal of Indonesian military forces from East Timor. To facilitate an internationally supervised referendum there so we, the East Timorese people, can ourselves decide our own political destiny. Only then can the 'slavery and oppression and tyranny' my people now suffer, come to an end.

Abé Barreto Soares is one of five East Timorese who visited North America in April 1993 to talk about the future of their occupied country. Their speaking tour was initiated by the East Timorese community in Melbourne, Australia, with the support of the East Timor Talks Campaign. It was hosted and coordinated in North America by the East Timor Action Network USA and East Timor Alert Network Canada.
For more information contact ETAN
Tel. 914 428 7299
PO Box 1182 White Plains, New York 10602